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Tracing the Mosaic of Mediterranean History

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(ed.)

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Corsairs, slaves and converts in the History of Mediterranean

Salvatore Bono

The 'History of the Mediterranean' consists, in its most significant and essential form, of the continuity of relations, amicable or conflictive, between both sides of the Mediterranean: in other words, the contacts and exchanges, the passage of things, of men, of intellectual elements and material goods, between one shore of the Mediterranean and the other. And in this overall contest the relations and exchanges between the Christian world, in particular that of Western Europe, and the Islamic world, hold a position of prominence.

It is the relations between these two worlds in the modern period that provide, in any case, the framework in which my contribution is placed. To attempt even to summarise these relations in all their complexity is clearly beyond my present scope. They stretch from the completion of the Christian re-conquest of the Iberian peninsula (1492) to the French conquest of Algiers (1830). Corsair activity, slavery and conversions represent, in my view, a very significant aspect of these relations, indeed the most significant of all on the social level.

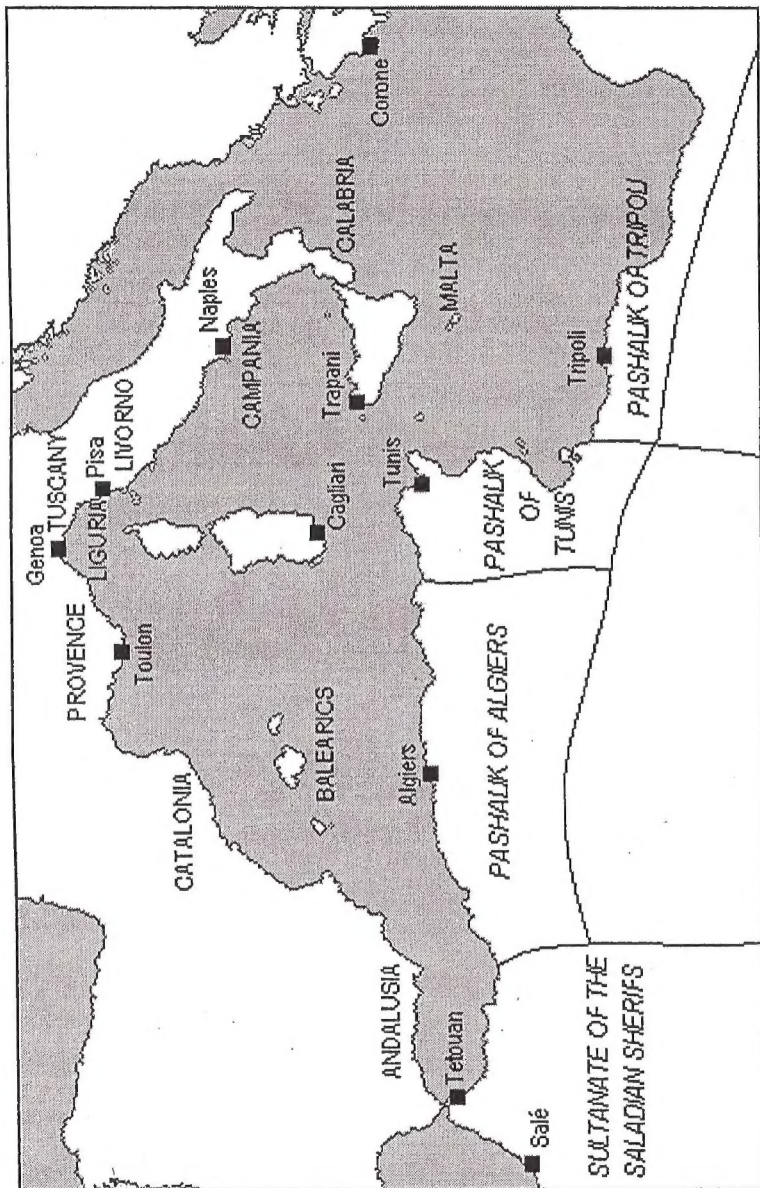
Corsairs of various origin

Corsair warfare and piracy – the same activity, in respectively their legal and illegal forms – have been present in the History of the Mediterranean since time immemorial. There is a fairly substantial bibliography as far as the ancient and medieval periods are concerned; in the latter period corsair activity became an aspect of the rivalry and conflict between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean.

In the collective memory of us Europeans, especially those of us who live along the littorals of the Mediterranean, both in historiography and in the popular consciousness, the corsairs and pirates in the History of the Mediterranean were Muslims, and we Europeans and Christians their victims. When we talk of corsairs in the Mediterranean in the modern period we thus think above all of the Barbary city-states of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, and other Muslim corsair towns, such as Salé and Tetuan, in Morocco.

The truth is, however, that the corsair activity of Muslims was opposed by that of Christian fleets and also by private freebooters. As Christian corsairs we must above all recognise the two religious military orders, the Knights Hospitallers (or Knights of St. John of Jerusalem) with their base in Malta and the Knights of St. Stephen, with their headquarters in Pisa and Livorno. The role of private corsairs in the History of the Mediterranean has hitherto been little studied. They operated quite legally – and hence must be defined as corsairs and not pirates. They acted as corsairs under the flags of various states: of Tuscany, of Genoa, of Naples, and of the Knights of Malta themselves. Other corsair bases were Cagliari and Trapani, Toulon and Ciotat in Provence, Majorca and Ibiza in the Balearics, and so on.

Corsairs of various origin operated under each flag. Even more various was the provenance of the capital – Genoese and Livornese for the most part – that financed corsair activities. The corsair



MAP 3 *The corsair's Mediterranean*

profession, both in its Christian and Muslim versions, was a great occasion for bringing together men of different origin. It was also a powerful engine of economic interests. Both on the Christian and Muslim sides, corsair warfare had its own laws and rules; its own techniques, its own tactics, and, above all, its own especially adapted boats.

The naval superiority of corsairs

The naval superiority of corsairs, and especially of Muslim corsairs, was due especially to the agility and speed of their boats. Corsair ships took the enemy by surprise, and escaped from them by sudden and rapid manoeuvres. Detailed knowledge of the coasts and especially of the islands, large and small, enabled them to lie in hiding, concealed from view, and to ambush or intercept unsuspecting ships. The history of corsair engagements in the Mediterranean is made up of innumerable episodes, of victories and defeats, of courageous and daring assaults, of prudent or precipitous flights.

Corsairs, however, did not limit themselves to intercepting, surprising and giving chase to enemy ships: they also landed on shore, with the aim of taking captives or booty. Corsair incursions were especially directed against the coasts of Italy, from Calabria to Campania, from Tuscany to Liguria; against all the islands of the Western Mediterranean, the shores of Spain, more precisely those of Catalonia and Andalusia; and, from the last quarter of the sixteenth century, also against the French coasts of Languedoc and Provence.

From the mid-seventeenth century to 1830 some European states concluded treaties with the Barbary States to contain the corsair risk and ensure the safety of their own shipping at sea; often, to obtain this guarantee, tribute was offered, either in money or kind. We may recall the treaties of Sweden with Algiers in 1729 (16 April) and later in 1792 (5 May), with Tunis in 1736 (23 December), with

Tripoli in 1741 (15 April) and in 1802 (2 October). Denmark signed a treaty with Algiers in 1746 (10 August), with Tunis in 1751 (8 December), with Tripoli in 1752 (22 January), and again with Algiers in 1772 (17 May). There was a renewed outbreak of Barbary corsair activity, however, in the period from the French Revolution (1789) to the Congress of Vienna (1815). It was then stamped out for good, thanks to the decisive intervention of the European powers.

The proceeds of the booty

By the capture of ships and incursions on land, corsairs amassed enormous booty in terms both of men and of merchandise. Corsairs, whether public or private, in part used this booty, and in particular the prisoners they took, for their own purposes; in essence slave labour. For the most part, however, merchandise plundered and slaves (mainly men, but also women and children) were sold off to finance the enterprise and to share out the profits.

Corsairs, both Muslim and Christian, were also obliged to pay a tax on their booty to the state authorities. The percentage of this tax varied, of course, but was of the order of 10 to 12 percent. It was paid in coin or, at least in part, in goods. Other percentages had to be paid to various public officials and state administrators.

From the proceeds of the booty it was also necessary to deduct the various running costs (for unloading and warehousing merchandise, for the upkeep and feeding of slaves, for operations of marketing and sales, etc.). In the Maghreb the proceeds were divided fifty-fifty: half to the corsairs themselves (the captain or *ra'is* of the ship, the crew, any soldiers on board, freeborn oarsmen), half to the owner of the ships (the state itself, a great corsair chief, or a group of shareholders who had underwritten the venture). In Malta, the most important Christian corsair centre, public and private, two

thirds of the profits (not a half) were due to the ship-owners, a third to the crew.

It needs to be pointed out that the booty taken by Barbary corsairs was often re-exported back to the European countries from which it had come. The European merchants, who purchased the booty through representatives and middlemen stationed in the cities of the Barbary coast, thus became, in some sense, accomplices of the corsairs. The resale of booty was in fact essential to ensure the economic viability, and hence the continuity, of corsair activity. Corsair warfare in the Mediterranean thus led, albeit violently and at the cost of the sufferings of the thousands of human beings who were its innocent victims, to the establishment of a close-knit network of economic ties between the European and Muslim countries.

The booty of greatest value for corsairs was that of the persons captured on board the ships they seized or those they abducted from their homes and settlements close to the coasts. Those captured were considered slaves, the legitimate property of the state or of the private individuals who had taken them captive or had subsequently purchased them. This applied in equal measure to both Muslims and Christians: to all prisoners, of the opposite religion, captured in the course of each land or naval war, each battle and engagement, each corsair assault.

Only one significant difference distinguished the Christian from the Muslim world in this respect: for the corsairs of the Barbary coast, slaves served primarily to extort a price for their ransom; their use as galley-slaves or in other capacities, was mainly secondary and provisional for them. For Christians, on the contrary, Muslim slaves were principally used as the manpower to propel their galleys or at any rate as forced labour; any income generated through the payment of ransom was on the whole occasional.

Of the Christian slaves in the Islamic world Italians, Spaniards and Frenchmen undoubtedly formed the majority, but slaves could

be found from every country in Europe. Was there not as late as the 1950s a civil servant in the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eino Välikangas, who recalled that his grandfather had been a Barbary coast slave? We know of a few autobiographical accounts written by German and Dutch slaves. Others no doubt exist; I myself happened to find one previously unmentioned account, written by the German Nikolas Fuerneisen, a slave in Algiers in the years 1711–1712. Perhaps some Scandinavian slave may also have written an account of his misfortunes; or perhaps at least letters or other documents exist in the archives which may throw light on the life of such slaves.

Slaves and converts of both religions

Just as corsair activity was exercised both by Muslims and Christians, so the slaves in the Mediterranean world were of both religions. Of Muslim slaves curiously little has been written, and little about them is yet known¹. Their conditions and their fate in many respects coincided with, or closely resembled, those of the Christian slaves. One curious detail may be mentioned: Queen Christina of Sweden, during her long residence in Rome, was the owner of several Muslim slaves and chose to act as godmother to some who became baptised. In 1686 she brought eight of them to baptism, all coming from Corone in Greece aged between 7 and 30.

The study of the slavery of Muslims in the European countries enables us to glimpse a 'Mediterranean' aspect of the phenomenon. Both the Muslim and Christian authorities were willing to allow slaves of the other religion some privileges – such as their own

¹ Allow me to mention that my book *Schiavi musulmani nell'Italia moderna* on Muslim slaves is under print.

places of prayer or burial grounds, or the right to select their own representatives. Their main aim in doing so was to ensure reciprocity of treatment for their fellow-believers enslaved on the other side of the Mediterranean.

The life – over several years or perhaps for many – of tens of thousands of men, women and children belonging to one religion and one civilisation, and reduced to slavery in the territory of another, was one of the typical phenomena of Mediterranean history. But even more ‘Mediterranean’ is the fact that a large proportion of these slaves, at least as regards the Christians, eventually returned to their birthplace and brought with them some knowledge, an idea – however vitiated by prejudice or incomprehension – of the ‘other world’ across the sea in which they had been enslaved.

Other than through the payment of ransom, slaves could also obtain their freedom thanks to an exchange, negotiated either by the slaves’ own families or by institutions and governments that usually made use of the help of mediators. The whole ransoming business, either through the sending of envoys, or through long-distance negotiation, created a network of contacts, of relations, of financial flows, about which a great deal still remains to be discovered and elucidated. All this is ‘History of the Mediterranean’.

It remains to say something about conversions: a phenomenon closely connected with slavery. Almost all converts took this step once they had become, after a longer or shorter time, more fully integrated into the ‘other’ society. ‘Renegade’ (from the Latin *renegare*, to renounce) was for centuries the pejorative epithet which the Christian world attached to those who abjured their Christian faith and embraced that of the prophet Mohammad. There is no source of Mediterranean history, in particular no source treating of corsair activity and the Barbary States, that does not make reference to renegades. Yet historians were a great deal slower in addressing this phenomenon than other aspects of Mediterranean history, such as slavery and ransom.

The fundamental analysis was conducted by the French historian Bartolomé Bennassar in his study *Les chrétiens d’Allah* (1989), based on a corpus of 1 500 cases of ‘renegades’. It also included a few Scandinavians, captured by corsairs while sailing on Dutch or German vessels. No doubt traces of the destinies and misadventures of other northerners who ended up as slaves in the Mediterranean may also be found in the archives and libraries of the Scandinavian countries.

Conversion to Islam not only facilitated the slave’s return to freedom, but enabled the new Muslim to enjoy equality with all his fellow-Mohammedans and, like them, to accede or rise to positions of the highest economic status or political rank. In the perspective of Mediterranean history, it should be pointed out that Islamised Europeans maintained relations with their families back home in Christian Europe; they made use of them and helped them in their trading activities, in their financial operations, and more generally in economic initiatives. They thus helped to create a network of contacts and relations between the two worlds. This is a significant aspect of the History of the Mediterranean.

Rather different is the phenomenon of the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, which still remains little understood. Almost all converts among Muslims were slaves too. Domestic slaves, who had no further contacts with their country of origin, nor with other Muslims. Under these conditions, they were easily induced to accept or suffer the conversion proposed or imposed by their masters. In many cases these converts were children and adolescents who knew, or remembered, next to nothing about Islam.

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In conclusion, I wish to stress the difficulty of presenting a comprehensive synthesis of three related phenomena so significant and so extensive in the History of the Mediterranean as corsair activity, slavery and conversions. However I hope my all too brief remarks may have suggested something of their importance.

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